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Disruptions: 9/11 and the 'End of History'

The topic of disruptions in the context of 9/11 gives rise to a vital, yet arguably false dichotomy between events and the greater dynamic of historical processes. Theodore Adorno's claim that certain events simply 'cannot be dismissed as a superficial phenomenon', especially those occurrences of extreme violence, is crucial to this particular disruption.[1] However, highlighting the weight of the event as a tragedy in its immediate context is not the purpose of the present work, for the underlying thrust of Adorno's claim was that some disturbances demand attention, as they may serve to dismantle particular historical narratives. In Adorno's own context, the Holocaust cast a menacing shadow over the age of modernity and prior notions of historical progress. In broader terms, certain disruptions have the ability to reshape, or more accurately, position our historical consciousness.

Drawing upon the theme of disruptions, this article will analyse the symbolic impact of 9/11 against a backdrop of the popular, meta-narratives that had gained momentum during the 1990s. Two of the most influential ideas of this kind were Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History' theory and Bernard Lewis' 'Clash of Civilizations' model. Fukuyama claimed mankind's dialectical struggle to discover and adopt the best form of government had been won at the end of the Cold War, whilst Lewis prophesised a future in which conflicts would be solely defined by cultural and religious differences. The paper will combine as well as assess the relationship between these historical narratives and broader policy issues that came to dominate the post-9/11 landscape. The paper will also investigate the inadequacies and dangers of outmoded responses to terrorism, both domestically and abroad, illustrating why 9/11 highlights a crisis of historical misunderstanding in the persistence of an obsession with high-stakes narratives rooted in the bi-polar, Cold War dynamic. The concept of 'historical misplacement' runs as a central theme throughout the essay, as it is symptomatic of the struggle to grapple with the rapid pace of change in the political and geo-political arenas today. The premise of the argument is that the initial disruption, rather than *disrupting* in a literal sense, manifests itself as a realisation of the times we live in, which in turn engenders panic.

The End of History?

Following the publication of his infamous article 'The End of History', Francis Fukuyama was careful to placate his critics, as they 'pointed to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Chinese communist crackdown in Tiananmen Square, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as

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[1] Theodore W. Adorno, 'Education After Auschwitz', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* trans. by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 192.

evidence that history was in fact continuing'.[2] Fukuyama responded by claiming that the history he spoke of concerned the grander processes of Marx and Hegel, rather than the mere occurrence of particular events. In other words, Fukuyama was engaged in a teleological discourse of the evolution of human societies, which he believed was driven by a dialectical struggle towards our 'deepest and most fundamental longings'.[3] Engrossed in the optimistic context of the post Cold War period, Fukuyama claimed that although particular events would of course occur, the greater, dialectical struggle for civilization had been overcome, signified by the ascendency of liberal democracy and the fall of the Soviet Union. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy would successfully realise mankind's deepest longings, and that all subsequent political history would be played out, more or less, in a succession of liberal democratic revolutions the world over. Yet the conflicts in Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda would soon display the inadequacies of such a worldview. In fact, the sobering experience of the mid to late 1990s placed the 'rhetoric at odds with continuing violence, insecurity and militarism' as wars during the period claimed more lives 'than in any decade since the end of the Second World War'.[4] Fukuyama failed to foresee new avenues for chaos, or the prospect of an event that could trigger new struggles or even reshape liberal democracy itself thus rendering its teleological status redundant. Whether we can accuse Fukuyama of not properly dusting his crystal ball is indeed questionable; rather, we can state the author could have made greater efforts to remove himself from his immediate context.

The 'Clash of Civilizations' or Hybrid Warfare?

Throughout the 1990s, taking on board the persistence of global insecurity and new, ethno-cultural driven conflicts, other commentators such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, sought to challenge Fukuyama. These authors adopted the very same dialectical approach Fukuyama applied to the Cold War and instead mapped a 'Clash of Civilizations' theory, which prophesised how a new struggle for world domination would be based on cultural divisions.[5] Doran cites such a position as being 'deeply troubled, pessimistic, and foreboding' compared to Fukuyama's 'optimistic' insights.[6] Yet like Fukuyama's proposition, the 'Clash of Civilizations' theory also suffered from a severe Cold War hangover. In its projection of increasingly fundamental struggles into the future, the theory was evidently based on a continuation of the conventionalities of the past century. Maps coloured on the basis of particular cultural customs and races placed humanity in sweeping blocks of shared interests, yet ultimately failed to account for the sharp realities of new forms of warfare that were emerging. Throughout the 1990s, multiple conflicts took place in Eastern Europe and Africa; however, strategists, who were embroiled in a fantasy of an 'imagined nuclear war', inadequately described these wars as 'low-intensity' conflicts.[7] The experiences of the victims were, of course, far from low-intensity. Yet the dizzy, factional intricacies of these new conflicts, much like the war in

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[2] Francis Fukuyama, 'By Way of Introduction', in *The End of History and The Last Man,* ed. by Francis Fukuyama (New York: The Free Press Macmillan, 1992), p. 12.

[3] Ibid, p. 11.

[4] Mary Kaldor, 'Introduction', in *Restructuring the Global Military Sector Volume 3: Global Insecurity,* ed. by Mary Kaldor (London: Pinter, 2000), p. 1.

[5] Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs,* 72, 3 (1993), pp. 22-49.

[6] Robert Doran, 'Terrorism and Cultural Theory: The Singularity of 9/11', *University of Wisconsin Press, SubStance*, 37, 3 (2008), p. 5.

[7] Kaldor, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3.

Syria raging today, led many to conveniently dismiss them as anarchic, meaning they lacked 'logic and that therefore nothing could be done except perhaps to contain them or to relieve the symptoms through, for example, the provision of humanitarian assistance'. Terrorist hijackers and Islamic fundamentalism did fall under the radar of security planners, yet even towards the end of the 1990s, NATO strategists were still more concerned with the emergence of a peer-competitor or 'a full-scale inter-state global war', conceding that, although such a scenario was no longer likely, it was 'probably the most important contingency for which they must plan'.[8] Following the fall of the Soviet Union, many theorists in the West tapped into the crisis of direction gripping policy makers, and the question of when the next big thing would emerge dominated large swathes of the geo-political, strategic discourse. Arguably, this obsession was rooted in an all-pervasive reality that liberal democracy had in fact developed in unison with Communism. Technology, innovation, military means, mass culture, and the strong ties that would cement relations within the West, all arguably relied on this greater enemy. Like balancing forces, each depended on the other for its matter. To many, it was as though the Cold War and the nature of the threat it presented cemented the very definition of warfare, despite warnings throughout the 1990s that a new form of violence was emerging.

Doran advances the notion that 9/11 might have signalled for the likes of Huntington and Lewis that 'the clash of civilizations had just occurred in spectacular fashion'.[9] This is supported by the fact that a broader and arguably excessive response took the helm in the immediate post-9/11 age, which was marked by a series of disastrous military campaigns. There are two interlocking elements to this charge of excessiveness. Firstly, the question of whether an indiscriminate response flirted too closely with the terrorists' agenda and secondly, the question of whether a 'war on terror' is winnable by conventional, military means. Regarding the first aspect to this charge, it is widely documented that Bernard Lewis, who first coined the term 'Clash of Civilizations', held the view prior to 9/11 that democratizing the Middle East was essential, as the values propagated by many of its religious and political leaders were on an inevitable collision course with the values of liberal democracy. Controversially, Lewis believed that democratization could only be achieved by military force, and that the peoples of the region longed for Western liberal democracy. It is worth noting that Lewis, a specialist on Islam, held great ideological sway among neoconservative circles in the US administration during the 1990s. After the Iraq War (2003) and the Arab Spring (2011), the notion that liberal democracy is directly applicable to the Middle East has become far less palatable, as the vacuums that followed the dismantling of questionable but sturdy regimes allowed for extremist elements and terrorist cells, being pre-disposed to unconventional conflict situations, to surface. Doran also notes how Lewis' 'Clash of Civilizations' theory and US foreign policy in the Middle East 'followed Bin Laden's script', arguably strengthening the terrorists' scope and capabilities.[10] Michele L. Malvesti seconds this, claiming Bin Laden orchestrated 9/11 precisely in order to push the United States to engage the Muslim world indiscriminately, which would subsequently aid recruitment drives.[11] In this regard, it is important to note that 9/11 was in fact orchestrated during a desperate period for Bin Laden's group; the

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[8] Ibid, p. 4.

[9] Doran, 'The Singularity of 9/11', p. 5.

[10] Ibid, p. 5

[11] Michele L. Malvesti, 'Explaining the United States' Decision to Strike Back at Terrorists', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13, 2 (2001), pp. 85-106.

declaration of a *fatwa* against the US in 1996, and successive attacks on US interests abroad 'achieved none of their objectives and produced virtually no response'.[12]

Is the 'War on Terror' Winnable?

The question of whether the 'war on terror' is actually winnable is one that serves to highlight the asymmetric nature of the conflict. It also raises pertinent questions regarding the consequences of reactionary responses to terrorism domestically and abroad.

9/11 launched the West into a troubling, dynamic form of warfare; one no longer based on increasingly larger conflicts, nor technological or economic superiority, placing it at odds with the advanced research and development culture that dominates military planning. It also unleashed a wave of terror or 'State of Emergency' at home and abroad, which had the potential to undermine the principles of liberal democracy itself. In an Orwellian display, asymmetrical war became essential to peace, as world leaders vowed to protect democracy and liberty. In doing so, a coalition of nations successively undermined key tenets of international law, launching into a conflict without borders, regular armies or jurisdiction, whilst simultaneously dismantling the civil liberties that lay at the base of the 'liberal' system at home, albeit in order to preserve national security. Excerpts from President George W. Bush's state of the union address just days after the attack foreshadowed the intrusive and expansive nature of this new kind of warfare: 'The terrorists' directive commands them to make no distinctions among military and civilians …Americans should expect a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have seen…either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists…I ask you to hug your children'.[13]

With regards to the conflict in the international arena, part of the symbolic nature of 9/11 was its role as a reminder that 'big' history was continuing, which was perhaps forgotten in its truest sense in the heady optimism of the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, the difficulty in grappling with the advent of unconventional warfare was significantly amplified by the overarching, bi-polar dynamic of the previous century. David C. Rapoport argues that the power of 9/11, in particular the use of 'passenger planes as bombs' actually helped to 'reshape the character of international relations' from relative inaction to *very* active participation, as the citizen body demanded it. [14] The aforementioned 'new wars', previously dismissed by strategists as 'low intensity' conflicts, suddenly demanded a response. [15] However, the mere terminology behind the 'war on terror' presented immediate difficulties, as it does not refer to a fixed, physical entity or state. This undermines policy makers' capabilities to challenge it by conventional means. This is further exacerbated by the fact that as a result of the aforementioned outlook of military planners, who are traditionally more concerned with high-stakes conventional warfare, 'long range-strike capacities using advanced military technology' tend to take precedence over other contingencies.[16] In practice, measures such as air strikes have the potential to dismantle terrorist cells as well as to intensify the conditions

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[12] David C. Rapoport, 'The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11', *Anthropoetics – The Journal of Generative Anthropology*, 8, 1 (2002), p. 18.
[13] George W. Bush, Text: Bush address to Congress, Washington DC, 21 September (2001), last accessed 11 September 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1555641.stm>.
[14] Rapoport, 'Four Waves', p. 10.
[15] Kaldor, 'Introduction', p. 3.
[16] Ibid, pp. 8-9

of a conflict, in which unintended civilian casualties are likely to benefit, rather than harm, the interests of terrorist groups.

Following 9/11, a series of unsuccessful military campaigns and diplomatic concessions have reshaped the Middle East, with an increasing number of failed states running congruently with the successes of terrorist groups. Additionally, the questionable legality and consequences of the 2003 Iraq conflict in particular have helped to lay the foundations for a new world order quite unlike the US-centric vision that seemed possible in 1990. Instead, a 'multi-polar' world, in which multiple large powers are beginning to engage more freely in international affairs has emerged; in the case of Russia in particular, US interventionism is often cited as an excuse for more strident geo-political strategies. The result has been an atmosphere of increasing chaos and confusion, and although incidentally, the years following 9/11 have come to symbolise America's dwindling influence. None of these trends seem to resonate with the notion that in the international arena, Western liberal democracy will triumph as the state of the 'last man' nor do they add credence to the view that the Cold War was the last great battle of human civilization, with many already resurrecting the term to define the recent breakdown in relations between the West and Russia. George W. Bush's Iraq 'victory' speech and the triumphalist rhetoric of David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy in Tripoli following NATO's intervention in Libya, serve as disturbing examples of the inadequacies of this terminal view of politics, as both countries almost immediately fell into chaos in their respective vacuums. Current global insecurity hints at a more entropic worldview, which lies in dangerous conflict with the post-Cold War notion that 'total victory' is possible.

The spectacle of 9/11 captured the public imagination with such force that it rapidly influenced many of the key tenets of liberal democracy in the domestic sphere. 9/11 represented a 'disruption' because it broke the status quo of 'conflict between sovereign states in which certain rules apply (to do with the treatment of prisoners, the prohibition of certain weapons)'.[17] Terror, therefore, rather than representing a particular or legitimate force, comes to represent 'unlawful combat' in the face of conventional power. This is a necessity given the security threat that terrorism presents to the civilian population; however, the terrorist category subsequently begins to carry strong undertones of *homo sacer*, an aspect of ancient Roman law that allowed for certain individuals to be 'killed with impunity and whose death had, for the same reason, no sacrificial value'.[18] In a similar vein, terrorist suspects appear to lie outside of the normal conventionalities of the law, or at least the principles that ought to guide it within liberal democracies, as demonstrated by the advent of detention without trial and the re-evaluation of previously questionable interrogation methods. Though we should not immediately cast aside pragmatic approaches to tackling terrorism, Slavoj Žižek points to the commentary that followed 9/11, citing Jonathan Alter's article 'Time to Think about Torture' as a signal that a state of panic was quickly gaining legitimacy in the public discourse.[19] The key implication for Žižek is not necessarily that torture is an ineffective method of gaining information vital to national security, but that responding to an attack by introducing

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[17] Slavoj Žižek, 'Are we in a War? Do we have an Enemy?', *London Review of Books*, 24, 10 (2002), pp. 3-6.
[18] Ibid. pp. 3-6.
[19] Jonathan Alter, 'Time to Think about Torture', *Newsweek* (5 November 2001), p. 1; Žižek 'Are we in a War?', p. 4.

torture as a legitimate topic of legal debate was a disturbing 'sign that the terrorists are winning'. [20] In short, the general discourse gave way to terror, and was now dealing in fearful, as opposed to fundamentally principled, responses.

It is also worth noting the philosophical undercurrents that supplemented the domestic response. The fundamentalist ideology of the modern terrorist represents a disturbing force for the Western psyche in particular, for which materialism and individual liberty have become universal foundations. The fact that the suicide tactics employed on 9/11 stood in stark opposition to a rational, material outlook, further heightened the response of panic and alarm. This element of fear and an unwillingness to engage with the terrorists directly is poignantly symbolised by the use of often ineffective unmanned drone strikes in the fight against terrorism. It is also an element religious terror groups seek to capitalise on for propaganda purposes, which might partly account for the use of extreme brutality such as beheading and crucifixion. Additionally, it is important to consider whether 'terror' constitutes the act itself or the state of fear that follows; the latter being the terrorist's objective. If the 'terror' itself is the emotional state and responses that follow it, pertinent questions regarding the purposes for which states of 'terror' are exaggerated among civilian populations, as well as complex issues regarding complicity related to coverage, rhetoric and spin, ought to be raised.

Disruptions for the Discipline

This visceral return of 'terrorism' demanded responses, not only in terms of strategy and cultural theory, but also history. Kaplan directs us towards various 'subversion panics' that have gripped the United States, in which he charts a history that dates back to the Catholic-Masonic conspiracy of 1778, all the way to McCarthyism and the anti-communist hysteria that came to define the American experience during the mid-twentieth century. Kaplan also points towards the Haymarket disaster of 1886 and the subsequent 'war on terror' that followed, as well as the 1920 Wall Street bombing, as disruptions that have helped to define US culture, politics and history. Whilst arguing that 'in terrorism, nothing but the names, the causes, and the technology really changes', Kaplan acknowledges that 9/11 inflated the corpus of terrorism studies 'beyond all reasonable bounds', significantly broadening the scope of a previously far smaller discourse, for better or for worse. [21] Rapoport also offered historical reflections shortly after 9/11, highlighting the similarities between the Bush administration's public response and an appeal made precisely one hundred years prior, when Theodore Roosevelt summoned 'a worldwide crusade to exterminate terrorism everywhere' following the assassination of President William McKinley. Rapoport's article on the 'Four Waves' analyses anarchism, anti-colonialism, the new left, and religion in their historical context in relation to 9/11, identifying terrorism's major trends and how it has gradually become 'implanted in modern culture' on an increasingly deadly scale. He also charts a narrative that inspired the aesthetic of 9/11, identifying the increasing popularity of airline hijacking in the fourth religious wave, which he claims began in the late 1970s. [22] Yet, crucially, this narrative was not so readily identifiable prior to 9/11, highlighting once again the importance of

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[20] Žižek, 'Are we in a War?', p. 5.

[21] Jeffrey Kaplan, 'Terrorism and Religious Violence', in *Terrorist Groups and the New Tribalism: Terrorism's Fifth Wave* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 13.

[22] Rapoport, 'Four Waves', p. 16.

disruptions in their ability to anchor a particular historical period, and their ability to inspire the expansion of a particular discourse.

Conclusion

9/11 has come to occupy a near mythical status in global history and represents a severe disruption in the narrative of conventional warfare both domestically and abroad.[23] Yet, as this paper has demonstrated, the event itself paradoxically 'changed everything' in the domestic and international arena, not because it was entirely new or unaligned with the growing trend of fundamentalist terrorism and unconventional warfare, but because it brought to the fore a 'reality' in the most disturbing expression. Herein lies the power of the 'event', which is easily identifiable, symbolically powerful, and demands immediate attention over the greater, more nuanced trends of history on which theorists tend to differ. Although we could equally cite the genocide in Rwanda and the tragedy of Srebrenica as examples that dismantle the idea of an 'End of History', it is admissible to claim such an outlook gained credence due of a lack of stark, violent evidence of a more entropic world in the Western sphere. Such a sudden and violent attack on American soil cemented the notion that the future would surely be one of global insecurity, which is why it so sharply reshaped international relations and arguably marked the advent of warfare-come-dynamic instability. This, however, displays the severe need for 'global' approaches, as well as the brutal inadequacies of intellectual isolationism, which often posits that our historical consciousness ought to be inherently tied to the Western experience. The greatest implication of 9/11 for Fukuyama's argument is, however, a domestic issue, as its extremities summoned forth a culture of fear and a frightening obsession with extreme violence, which holds the propensity to accommodate invasive forms of national security, whilst simultaneously perpetuating 'terror' as a mode of thought. The event certainly holds this static status not just for the United States but also throughout the democracies of the West, and has therefore shaken the very foundations of what constitutes a liberal system. This, combined with the question of whether a 'war on terror' is actually winnable, presents a potentially disturbing disruption for liberals in particular, who look to institutionalised torture and imprisonment without trial and ask: 'have the terrorists won?' Ultimately, the answer to the question of whether states can effectively defend national security without undermining the tenets of individual liberty is inextricably tied to those most fundamental reflections on the scope of the modern state that have come to mark the last century.

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[23] Robert Doran and Rene Girard, 'Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with Rene Girard', *University of Wisconsin Press*, *SubStance, Issue 115*, 37, 1 (2008), pp. 20-32.

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